

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
COUNTY OF COUNTY OF NEW YORK

-----X
LANDMARK EDUCATION CORPORATION, :

Plaintiff, :

-against- :

HACHETTE FILIPACCHI MEDIAS GROUP, d/b/a
ELLE MAGAZINE and ROSEMARY MAHONEY, :

Defendants. :

Index No.

VERIFIED COMPLAINT

98115873

-----X
Plaintiff, Landmark Education Corporation, by its attorneys, Morrison Cohen
Singer & Weinstein, for its complaint against the defendants, respectfully show the Court and
alleges as follows:

I.

NATURE OF THE ACTION

1. This is an action for damages caused by defendants' publication of false
and defamatory statements of and concerning plaintiff. Jurisdiction and venue are based upon
the residence of defendant Hachette Filipacchi Medias Group, d/b/a ELLE Magazine, doing
business in the State, County and City of New York, upon the commission of tortious acts in the
State, County and City of New York, which caused injury here, and upon the publication of the
challenged material by defendants in the State, County and City of New York.

#208251

II.

PARTIES

2. Plaintiff Landmark Education Corporation ("Landmark") is an employee-owned California corporation engaged in the business of making educational programs available to the general public, through its more than 40 offices worldwide. Landmark is authorized to do business in New York and maintains offices at 425 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10021.

3. Defendant, Hachette Filipacchi Medias Group ("HFM"), is, upon information and belief, a Delaware corporation engaged in the publishing business, authorized to do business in New York. Upon information and belief, HFM publishes and distributes a monthly magazine known as ELLE Magazine, a publication doing business in New York County which has offices located at 1633 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10019

4. Defendant Rosemary Mahoney ("Mahoney") is, upon information and belief, a resident of the State of New York. Mahoney is a professional journalist and contributory writer to ELLE who, upon information and belief, researched and authored an article entitled "Do You Believe in Miracles," that was published in the September 1998 issue of ELLE magazine ("the Article").

5. The research and writing of the Article occurred in the State of New York and the Article was widely published and distributed in the State of New York as contained in the September, 1998, issue of ELLE Magazine.

III.

BACKGROUND

6. Landmark offers a four-part curriculum with the basic program being The Landmark Forum ("The Forum"). Landmark also offers advanced programs on various subjects including communication, time management and productivity.

7. The Forum is a program that takes place on three days and one evening in which participants are asked to examine the fundamental assumptions that shape their actions and may limit their freedom and effectiveness. Participants are given an opportunity to discover new possibilities for actions which may enhance their productivity, improve their relationships and achieve a greater degree of satisfaction.

8. Participants in The Forum are neither required nor requested to follow, embrace, or worship any theology, dogma or doctrine. In addition, participants in The Forum and/or any of the other programs of Landmark are not taught any practices to repeat or rituals to follow nor are they subject to coercive influences.

9. Participants in The Forum are not required, requested or even permitted to donate all or a portion of their assets to Landmark or any other entity, group or individual. Participants in The Forum in New York pay \$375 as tuition to Landmark which covers the cost of the three day and one evening session.

10. Participants in The Forum are not obligated to attempt to "recruit" other individuals to participate in programs offered by Landmark.

Is she saving our lives or is she reaching into our handbags for our checkbooks?...Beth Handel knows how to hustle.

My \$375 has bought me a flimsy synthesis of world philosophies, littered with the sort of aphoristic suggestions abundant in high school yearbooks.

...paralleling aspects of...Fascism, and carnival hucksterism.

...in a kind of informal hypnotic process people can become submissive to voices of authority through a series of indirectly applied techniques of suggestion. Such hypnosis, practiced without formal trance induction, employs jokes, confusion, guilt, humiliation, group pressure, and sleep deprivation to assert its control. The stories leaders tell -- known as "killer shares" among experts who study such self-actualization groups -- are rehearsed but apparently spontaneous anecdotes calculated to deliver an emotional message.

Strategically placed suggestions are another form of subtly coercive influence. When Handel says at the start of our group experience of fear, "There might be some crying during this exercise," the suggestion is that we *should* cry.

...there is, experts agree, a denigration of critical thinking.

...in the end, the transformational key the Forum offers is nothing more than words, *My life has been transformed*. Say it enough times and it might come true.

A copy of the Article is annexed hereto as Exhibit "A" ;and made a part of this Complaint.

14. The Article, as a whole and, the use of the particular words set forth in paragraph 13 above, conveyed the following false and defamatory meanings of and concerning plaintiff:

- a. Landmark deprives participants of any moral viewpoint.
- b. Landmark is engaged in a mass-marketing pyramid scheme.

c. Landmark is engaged in criminal activity in its mass-marketing pyramid scheme.

d. Landmark is engaged in coercive thought reform.

e. Landmark targets the weak in character who it can more easily manipulate.

f. Landmark promulgates the ideas of Nazi sympathizers.

g. Landmark treats participants badly.

h. Landmark and its Forum leaders are more interested in getting money from participants than saving their lives.

i. Landmark's Forum leaders are engaged in hustling Forum's participants.

j. Landmark promulgates fascism and carnival hucksterism in its Forum sessions.

k. Landmark engages in informal hypnotic processes.

l. Landmark's Forum leaders use subtle coercive influence.

m. Landmark denigrates critical thinking.

n. Landmark engages in mind control and brain-washing.

15. The false and defamatory meanings and implications of and concerning plaintiff Landmark Education Corporation alleged in paragraphs 13 and 14 were also conveyed by the combination of individual statements contained in the Article, including the juxtaposition of words and statements to each other, which, in the aggregate, produced the false and defamatory inferences from which said meanings and implications were conveyed. Said false

and defamatory meanings of and concerning plaintiff were further conveyed by the false and defamatory portrayal of its Forum Leader, Beth Handel, as arbitrary, oppressive and malicious.

16. Defendants knew and intended that the particular statements set forth in paragraph 13 and in the Article as a whole (Exhibit "A") would convey each and every false and defamatory meaning and implication set forth in paragraph 14 of and concerning plaintiff. Such false and defamatory meanings were conveyed by the particular statements set forth in paragraph 13 and by the inferences drawn from the Article's statements in the aggregate.

17. Defendants' publication of the Article was made with actual malice in that the defendants knew that the aforesaid defamatory statements and meanings were false and/or published them or caused them to be published in reckless disregard of their truth or falsity and/or published them or caused them to be published without reasonable grounds for believing them to be true.

18. The aforesaid defamatory statements and meanings were published or caused to be published by defendants acting in a grossly irresponsible manner.

19. The aforesaid defamatory statements and meanings were published or caused to be published by defendants acting in a negligent manner.

20. The publication of the Article as described herein was accomplished by means which radically departed from responsible journalistic standards and practices.

21. The publication of the Article and the said defamatory statements, implications and meanings alleged herein, were motivated by ill-will and defendants' desire to harm the plaintiff and its ability to function.

22. By reason of the aforesaid acts of defendants, plaintiff has been held up to public disgrace, scorned and ridiculed, has been seriously injured in its business and will be further injured in its business in the future, has suffered grave and permanent impairment of its reputation and standing in the adult education community, and with the general public, and has otherwise been injured in its good name, fame and reputation.

WHEREFORE, plaintiff Landmark Education Corporation demands judgment against defendants as follows:

(1) In an amount no less than \$5,000,000 in actual damages together with interest thereon;

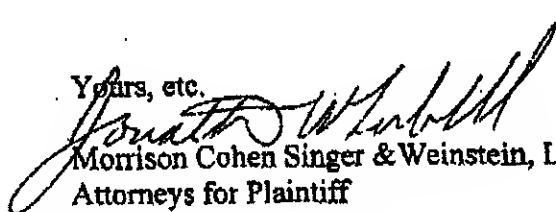
(2) In an amount no less than \$5,000,000 in punitive damages;

(3) For the costs and disbursements in this action including reasonable allowances for counsel fees and other lawful expenses; and

(4) For such other and further relief as the Court may find just and proper under the circumstances.

Dated: New York, New York
August 28, 1998

Yours, etc.

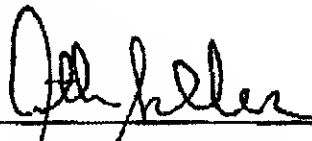

Jonathan W. Cohen
Morrison Cohen Singer & Weinstein, LLP
Attorneys for Plaintiff
750 Lexington Avenue
New York, New York 10022
(212) 735-8600

VERIFICATION

STATE OF CALIFORNIA)
) ss.:
COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO)

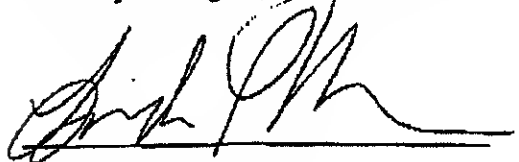
Arthur Schreiber, being duly sworn, deposes and says:

1. I am General Counsel to Landmark Education Corporation the Plaintiff herein.
2. I have read the foregoing Verified Complaint and know the contents thereof to be true except as those matters which are stated upon information and belief, and as to those matters, to the best of my information and belief, I believe they are true.

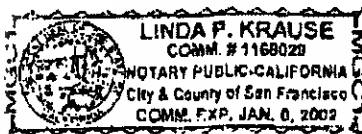


Arthur Schreiber

Sworn to before me this
28th day of August, 1998



Notary Public

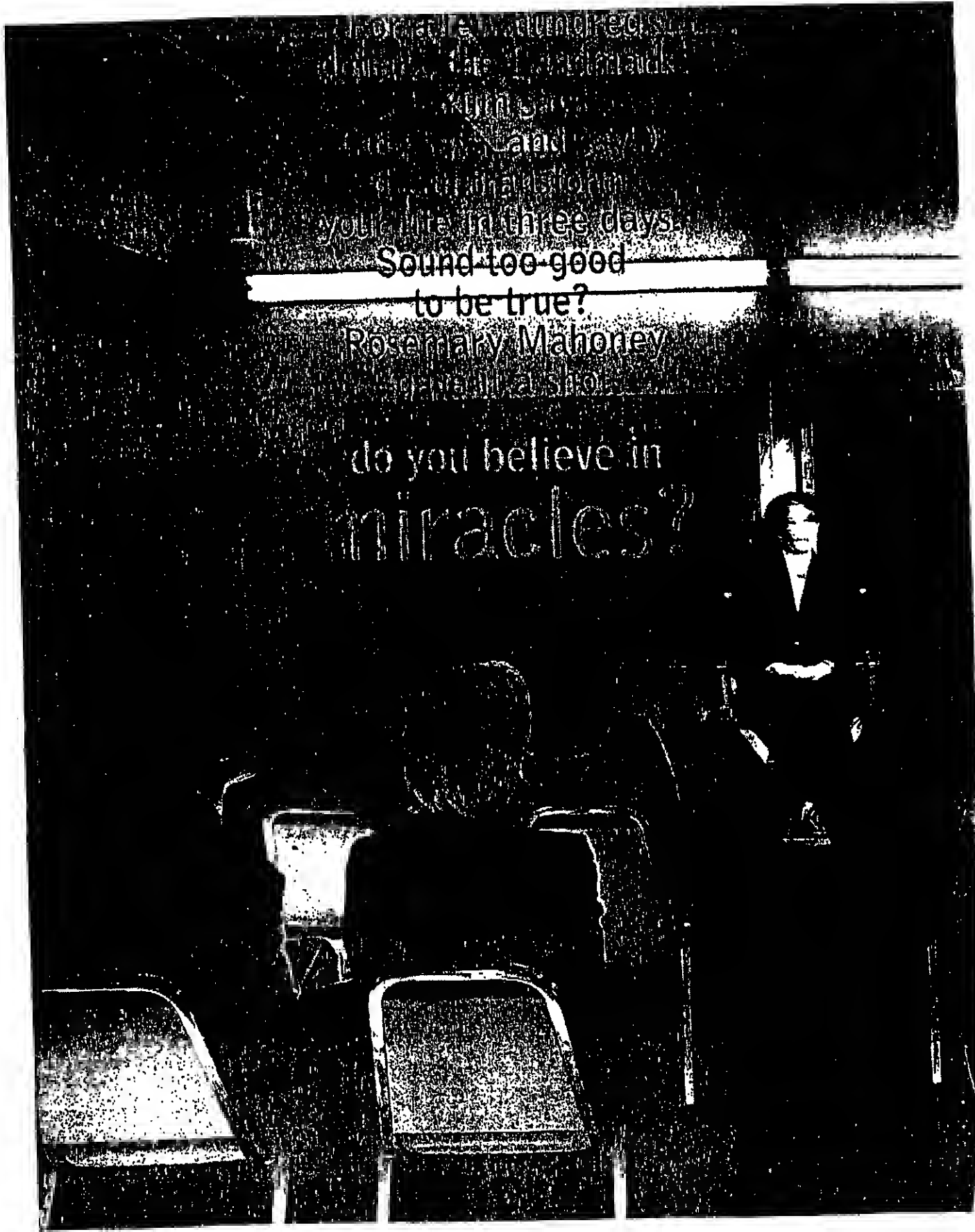


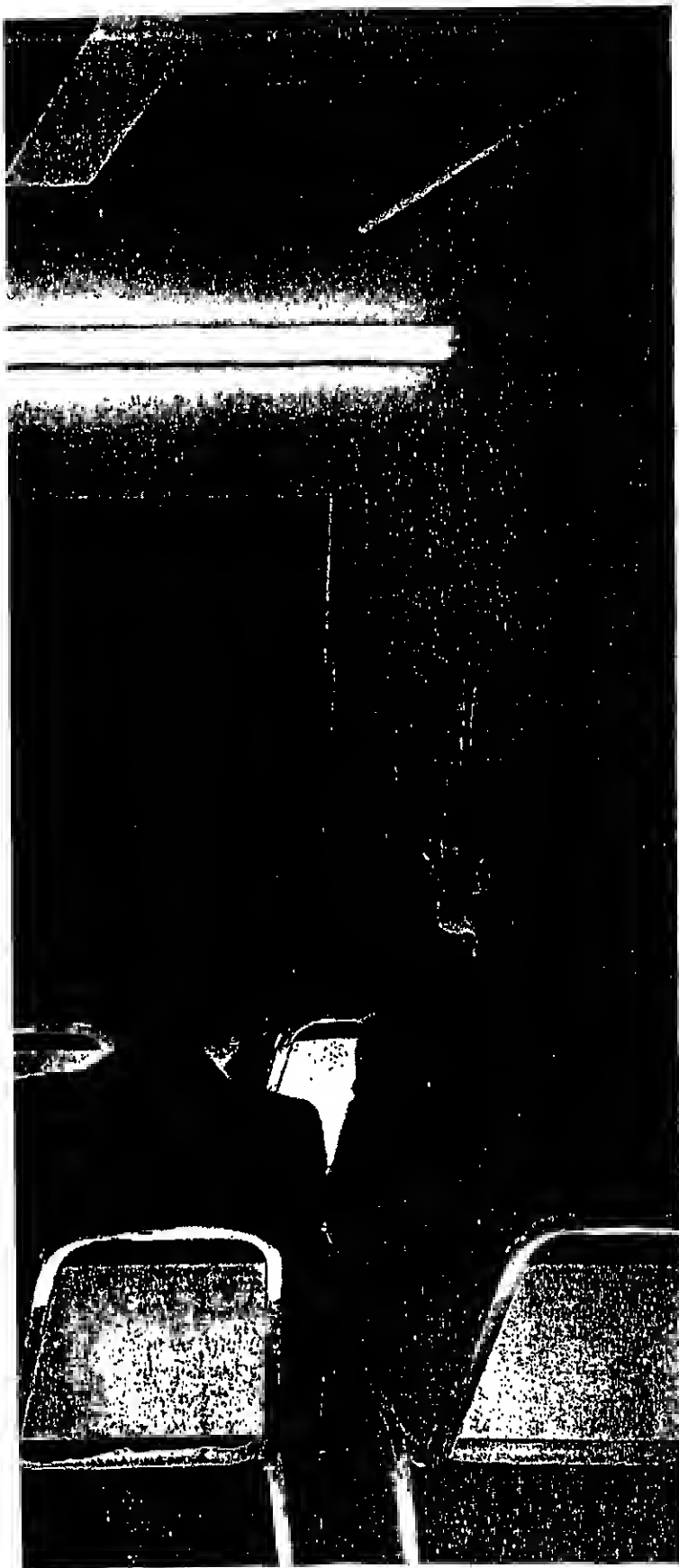
...miracle in a hundred years.
...the miracle
...said
...said
...miracle in
your life in three days.

Sound too good
to be true?

Rosemary Mahoney
...a show

do you believe in
miracles?





In talking about the Landmark Forum, people with experience of this self-improvement seminar describe its impact in wildly disparate ways. Janet Jenkins, a divinity student who completed the three-and-a-half-day weekend, calls it "a sort of religion with 'I' as God," while an enthusiastic young Forum volunteer tells me it's "a three-and-a-half-day intensive introduction to ideas and philosophies that will transform your life." James Williamson, an attorney at a high-powered law firm, says, "Either it's one of the most beneficial experiences I've ever had, or it's a complete con job." Kevin Garvey, a counselor who assists people coming out of cults or cultlike groups, says, "The Forum constitutes a brilliant anti-intellectual exercise . . . they take away the have that makes a moral view possible for each individual and call it freedom." Adam Kahn, who for two and a half years was deeply involved with Landmark and its advanced programs, expresses his present disillusionment by stating simply, "There's so much the Forum can't do."

Loosely classified as a large-group-awareness-training seminar and descended from the encounter-group movement of the '60s, the Landmark Forum is the introductory seminar to a series of self-actualization programs offered by the Landmark Education Corporation, an employee-owned company engaged in the booming business of "self-improvement." With last year's receipts of \$48 million, the corporation, which has around 300 paid employees (including forty-odd charismatic seminar leaders), boasts an army of some 7,000 volunteers worldwide. Volunteer hours invested in Landmark's programs and recruitment bespeak a level of customer satisfaction unheard of in most for-profit corporations. On the other hand, the sort of overzealous efforts Landmark's volunteers tend to display on the corporation's behalf are precisely what disturbs skeptics, many of whom feel that the Forum is a mass-marketing pyramid scheme, trafficking in subtly coercive thought reform and bent on ensnaring the weak of character in a slick web of palliative jargon. >

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KYLE H. PLUCKING (HARVARD) MANIPULATED BY JEFFREY HARRIS FOR BRADLEY CLARK LOP. MOST NAMES AND IDENTIFYING DETAILS HAVE BEEN CHANGED

The 180 Forum participants who, like me, have gathered in a bland conference room on New York's Fifth Avenue at nine on a Friday morning are here because the Forum has claimed that for \$375 it can "transform" our lives. The room, carpeted in gray and filled with rows of straight-backed chairs upholstered in a dowdy motel maroon, is oppressively unadorned. There's not much to look at but a tall director's chair on a dais and a pleated gray curtain pulled tight across the room's only windows. (From the street, the windows resemble the windows of a chicken coop, stubbornly streaked with brown and white stains.) Two blackboards stand on the dais, and at each corner of the rectangular arrangement of chairs are four microphones on stands. The only decorative touch is a vase of yellow tulips on a table.

The room is suffused with a mood of nervous anticipation. The woman to my left is swinging her foot and checking the phone number that's just appeared on the tiny screen of her electronic beeper. On my right, a bespectacled Asian man with a line of pens neatly clipped to his shirt pocket smiles eagerly at me and raises his hand in an anxious wave. Though we're sitting side by side, shoulders touching, I nod and wave back with an awkward little jerk of my hand.

Most of us have signed up for this course because we're dissatisfied with our lives; we're unfilled, isolated, or depressed; we're not successful enough, or we are successful but our success has left us hollow. Some of us are unhappy in our relationships or frustrated at not being able to unlock our potential. Others simply want to stop smoking, lose weight, get out of abusive relationships. Many are here at the request of friends, lovers, family members who claim to have experienced the "breakthrough" the Forum offers. We are all vulnerable, if only because we've paid our tuition and have as yet no clear idea of what we'll get beyond lofty abstractions like "In the Forum people come to grips with what it means to be human." The most we can safely predict is that for three consecutive days we will be required to sit here from nine A.M. to midnight, with two half-hour breaks and one ninety-minute dinner break. We will be asked to complete exercises, chiefly verbal, and homework assignments at night. We have all signed a confidentiality agreement as well as an agreement not to violate Landmark's copyright claims. We have answered formal questions about our mental-health history (including whether we've been hospitalized for psychiatric illness, are in psychotherapy, or have quit therapy against a therapist's wishes), and have, not without some wondering pause, signed away our right to a jury or court trial against the Landmark Education Corporation. Most of us are white, anywhere from twenty to forty years old, but there are Indians, blacks, and Hispanics as well. There are bankers here and lawyers, interior decorators and magazine edi-

tors. According to the Forum's glossy informational brochure, 31 percent of us have "some college education," 28 percent have a college degree, 20 percent a postgraduate degree, 40 percent are in technical or professional jobs.

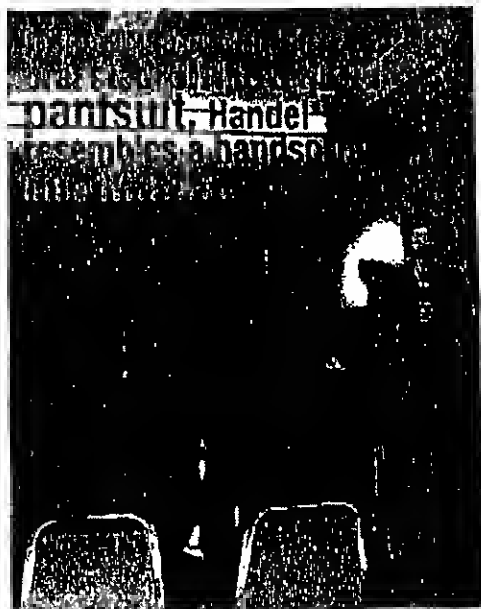
At nine o'clock, an energetic young woman hops onto the dais in front of the room and introduces herself as our Forum leader. I recognize her from an introductory evening I happened to attend here exactly one year ago. She was Beth Hanover then, with a stylishly severe crewcut, a rosy gold necklace the thickness of a garter snake around her neck, and the snappy manner

of an afternoon-talk-show host. Now she's Beth Handel, and her dark hair has grown into a glossy boy's regular, slick as mink and tightened against her scalp. "I'm Beth Han..." she stumbles on her last name. "Handel." In her brown double-breasted pin-striped pantsuit, she resembles a handsome little Mafia man. Her voice, carried through a tiny microphone pinned to her lapel, is slightly abrasive, her manner casual but sharpened with a gangster's tough-guy edge. She's fit and tidy and brassy. "Welcome to your Forum!" she barks, launching into an impeccably executed performance laden with anecdotes, tautologies, Landmark slogans, pithy quotations ranging from philosopher (and Nazi sympathizer) Martin

Heidegger to civil-rights torchbearer Martin Luther King, Jr.

Handel's barreling manner is lightened with the broadly screeching style of Joan Rivers. "How many people here want to lose ten pounds?" she asks. Many people raise their hands. "Okay. How many of you know how to lose ten pounds?" The same people raise their hands. "Oh, very good," she says with a sardonic squint, "a lot of good *that* knowledge is doing you." The room roars with laughter. Handel has a gift for telling stories, most of them about herself. A year ago I saw her bring the female members of her audience to tears with a cautionary tale of how, with her self-professed cranky selfishness, she nearly spoiled the sweet surprise her husband had planned for her on their wedding anniversary. He was only trying to love her; she was making herself unlovable. This morning, pacing, hands flying, she explains that while the Forum works "miracles" toward self-awareness, it will not keep us safe from the vagaries of life. "My husband left me!" she announces flatly. "Yes, even Forum leaders get divorced!" The Forum, she says, won't help you stop being human. "I am a jerk every day of my life. The only difference now is that within thirty seconds of being disgusting I can admit it and clean it up and move on."

Her seeming frankness, her self-referential anecdotes, inspire attention and trust. While Handel works, volunteers at the back of the room wearing pumpkin-orange nametags are busily checking our applications and surveying the room like exam proctors. In the opening hour Handel tells us a lot of what >



give her. Making her wrong will get him nowhere. A woman tells us she has problems with her sister; a man has been scarred by his father's violent treatment of him. The suffering contained in this ugly room is palpable.

Eventually Handel gives us a chance to drop out if we don't like what we've seen so far. "You can leave now and get all your money back." After this point, we'll be free to leave, but without a refund. A young man stands up and asks where morality fits into the Forum's philosophy. Handel says, "There is no right or wrong here, Arthur. It's not about judging. It's not about morality."

Arthur expresses an objection. Handel snaps, "You don't agree with most things, Arthur, with what most people say." The room goes deathly quiet. Arthur asks if the Forum aims to teach people that they have no moral obligation. Skeptical questions and searing answers fly back and forth until finally Handel interrupts him with "All I'm doing, Arthur, is holding up a mirror to you. You are opinionating. What you're doing now is what you do to everyone." She turns to the audience. "You are all so busy judging and evaluating and opinionating that you can't hear anyone else!" Arthur says, "But responsibility..." Handel cries, "You have no clue!"

A man at the back of the room, bored with this seemingly pointless wrangle, shouts out, "Cut him loose. Please!" Handel freezes, and like Mary Poppins sizing up the messy nursery, she turns her icy eye on the room. "No!" she says, one admonishing finger raised in authoritative warning. "We do not do that in the Forum. You are making it unsafe. We make it safe here."

Arthur asks what the Forum's position is on right and wrong. Handel says, "There is no truth. The whole truth is your speaking the truth. What you say." Arthur has difficulty with this solipsistic approach and chooses to take his refund and go home. The rest of the class nervously remains. Now that we're financially bound, Handel tells us we'll get tremendous value out of the Forum, by Monday our lives will be transformed, but we won't really know how to use the tools we've been given unless we sign up for Landmark's Advanced Course, an intensive four-and-a-half-day, \$700 seminar in which we'll continue to progress.

With the reminder that we have no right to expect the results if we don't follow the rules, we take our break. I walk around the block a few times, looking at my watch and wondering what I've gotten myself into. When we return, forty of us find the conference-room door shut against us. My watch indicates we have three minutes to go. The man next to me says his watch agrees. I ask the guard what his watch says. "Well, actually, my watch isn't working," he says sheepishly. "But they told me to close the door."

The not-so-subtle lesson is that we must operate according to the elusive Landmark clock instead of our own. I want to raise my hand and complain about what I perceive as a manipulative trick, but when the man finally opens the door for us, I go obe-

diently back to my seat and sit quietly while Handel continues outlining concepts that can help us transform our existence into an "extraordinary life." The day's lecture is interspersed with exercises in which we turn to our neighbor and discuss what we've just heard or go to the microphone to share our experiences.

Handel offers more "breakthrough" anecdotes from her life and the lives of clients (*They were married forty years, they did the Forum, they've been screwing every night since*), and more pithy quotations from Zen Buddhism, Nelson Mandela, G.B. Shaw, Charlie Parker. Stabbing at the blackboard with a river-thick piece of chalk, she posits one of the central rungs in the Forum's ideological ladder: The way we live is based on an unreality we ourselves concoct. With our interpretations, speculations, and opinions we invest "what happened" with our emotions and come up with a story that has nothing to do with reality. This is what's "killing" our lives. If we don't get rid of the story, it will appear again and again in our future. "You're living out of a story you made up!" Handel cries.

People smile, heads nod. We're introduced to the concept of the "racket," what Handel tells us is "a fixed way of being plus a persistent complaint." We are all running rackets that allow us to make ourselves right while making others wrong. And while our racket seems to give us a degree of protection and satisfaction, it is costing us "love, vitality, fulfillment, self-expression."

"I have heard stories that would shock you," Handel says of her experience leading the Forum all over the world. In one group she had a man who survived a Nazi death camp. All his life he had remained psychologically in the camp because he couldn't get rid of his "racket" against the camp guards. "When he could finally forgive, he was out of the camp." (How he managed to forgive is a minor detail not explained.) "You have to complete with people before you can move forward. Start to speak what just came up for you in this."

People line up at the microphones. A man wants to "complete" with his alcoholic mother; a woman has trouble with intimacy. Some people weep, some express anger at the world. A young woman says she's having difficulty with the idea of "completing" with her father because he's abusive. She keeps hoping things will change, but...

"It's never going to change!" Handel hollers at her.

The girl says, "Should I continue to embrace this man who..."

"You've never embraced! You don't have a clue!"

"Well, how do you establish a way of loving yourself and still allow this man to treat you in a crappy way. Is that not some form of self-abuse?"

Handel points a finger and shouts, "You are a racketeer!"

The problem lies with the girl, not with her father. She can't change him; she must change the way she thinks of him. She doesn't have to approve of his behavior, but she has to surrender her "right to resent" him, let him know she loves him.

In the course of the weekend we are instructed that the >



I want to ask
"why" but I
know by now that
"why" questions
are dismissed
in the Forum.

choose "a possibility of being." People stand and say what possibilities they have chosen. Loving. Fearless. Successful. Rich. Forgiving. Effective. The world is what we call it. If we adopt the Forum's language of positivity, distinction, and possibility (if we "speak" a "possibility"), combine it with the Forum's concept of fact versus story, and throw in the mantra *This shall be*, we'll get our transformation.

Each day ends with a homework assignment that involves making phone calls or writing letters to people we want to "complete" with. I go home, bleary-eyed, with Handel's prefab English echoing in my ears. *Impactful* instead of *affecting*. *Speak* instead of *say*. *Listen* as a transitive verb. "When you grant somebody else being, you're creating them as themselves" and "Be with your headache," she says. I don't want to be with my headache. I want to drink beer and take aspirin. Instead, dutifully, I do my homework. "Don't go home and complain about what they did to you today!" Handel shouts in her best Joan Rivers voice, floating her warning on a lily pad of humor. "The language in here is for here. Leave it here." I want to ask "why," but I know by now that "why" questions are dismissed in the Forum.

"Sunday will be a day you will never get over!"

Handel says mysteriously from her high chair, her shoes kicked off and her feet tucked under her. An assistant keeps stepping up to her with a steady stream of folded notes, and Handel flicks them open with icy efficiency as people tell their stories. Her brisk perfection has begun to annoy me. The microphone on her lapel, the transmitter attached to her waist under her jacket, its antenna sticking out behind her like a lobster's feeler, the automatic patter, the overheard stories, the generic objectification of people's heartaches. "You keep being in your mind a bad mother. What's the payoff?!" she says loudly to one woman while idly picking lint from her jacket sleeve. She banishes a woman's headache onstage with a kind of pseudo hypnosis. "Isn't that cool?" she says, grinning, and cautions us not to try this at home. If we find a way to accept our headache, our tiredness, our anger, it will go away. She encourages us to experience our individual fear collectively, careful to alert us that some will find this exercise upsetting ("There might be some crying in the room"). Bewith our fear, Handel tells us, locate it in our bodies, notice whether it moves. "Eyes closed! No talking!" Next we're instructed to be afraid of the two people next to us, then to be afraid of the entire room, then the seven million people in New York, until finally we should be afraid of the entire universe. On cue, the good students in the room begin crying and moaning. Slumped low in my seat, my head against the back of my chair, I can't help opening one eye to see what's going on around me. A pale-faced woman at the end of my row who had earlier said to me out on the sidewalk, "You single? Forum's a great way to meet people. I've done it twice," is rocking back and forth in her seat, crying and rubbing her thighs. Two rows behind me another woman has her face in her hands, her shoulders trem-

bling. Handel's noisy instructions rain relentlessly down on us. Now we're informed there's a flip side to this exercise that we'll find enormously funny. Within minutes, people are laughing. The funny thing is, Handel explains, while you're busy being afraid of the world, the world is afraid of you.

We've hardly recovered from this exercise when Handel hits us with another sales pitch. Tonight we can avail ourselves of a super-bonus homework exercise involving "risk and unreasonableness." If we're brave, we'll call three people and invite them to the Tuesday night meeting of the Forum. Unbelievably, unabashedly, Handel says, "Being 'unreasonable' means doing it when you don't even understand it!" She is careful to say that we will still get full value from the Forum if we don't do the super bonus, but if we do, our returns will be greater.

A young man gets up and says, "I'm afraid of you, Beth. Some of us have heard this is a marketing scheme." He wants his risk taking to involve something other than recruitment for the Forum. "I want you to say to us that you're interested in making money." Handel turns her palms up and shrugs. "I don't do anything if you don't pay me! There's no secret here. This is a business like any other. You go to a restaurant, they give you a meal, you pay them. If you like what we give you, tell your friends!"

Before the man can protest further, Handel says instructively, "Joe, what's the possibility of being you've enrolled yourself into this weekend?" "Fearlessness," he says. Handel grins in victory. Although many people in the room obviously share Joe's senti-

ments, he is the only person who actually challenged her. With visible suddenness Joe gets the point. He pulls out a twenty dollar bill and says, with wonder, "Beth, I want to give you a tip."

People are clearly excited, tantalized, electrified by the level of confrontation and frankness.

People are clearly excited, tantalized, electrified by the level of confrontation and frankness. Some are already adopting their new language. After one break, as we're hurrying back up the stairs, I hear a woman saying into a cell phone, "You always gave me the room to be who I wanted to be, Dad." People have had breakthroughs with their spouses and parents: "He didn't get mad at me when I said what I wanted." For many, this is the first time they've been encouraged to think about the nature of their lives and the harm their own perceptions can do them; what they've heard is nothing less than a revelation. During the breaks, people are lining up at the public telephones outside the building to "complete" with their friends and families and recruit them for the Tuesday-night meeting. One young man stands at the microphone to say he left a long message on his father's answering machine, his father called him back and left a great message in return, and he feels really good about it. Later he confesses to me his father didn't really call him back. I asked him why he told us otherwise. "I don't know," he says. "I wanted it to work."

On Sunday the grand punch line we've been waiting for—the point of the Forum—turns out to be an elementary exercise in existentialism. "Life is empty and meaningless. . . . What's out there is *nothing* and you make it mean a thousand things it doesn't mean." This is what we've paid for. The news that the way we think about life is surreal, debilitating, and above all >

that you are in a trap," Handel says. We are instructed to be "unreasonable" on Monday when we go back into "the world." "Share with people, enroll people, invite them to come Tuesday night," she says. "Who's going to do it, stand up." A lot of people stand up. She warns us to be careful how we spread the word, likening those who haven't been enlightened to shipwrecked people laboriously rowing a foundering boat. She introduces the beaming volunteers hovering at the back of the room. Soberly Handel tells us that the volunteer work has transformational value. A tear rolls down one volunteer's cheek. As she's saying good-bye, Handel's own eyes fill up with tears. With her hands in the position of prayer she says, "It was a privilege to serve you."

My Forum is over. Almost. On Tuesday night Handel shows up in pink-and-black high-heeled lace-up shoes, like a Victorian granny's boots. She is overanimated, high on her performance, cackling campily like a Hollywood witch. Most of us have brought guests to the meeting. My classmates offer inspirational testimonials. Marie says, "The Forum showed me how to look at myself." Joan, an actress, saw people making a movie and went right up and asked if she could be in their film. Handel focuses on the guests, pressing her foot to the recruiting pedal. "It took me ten years to find myself. We say that it will take six months in the Forum. You ask, How do they do that? You can't explain it. I'm going to invite you to take a leap, trust the person who brought you, and sign up for the Forum. If you aren't signing up, you're on the fence. Being on the fence is probably what stops you in the rest of your life. The people who brought you here are standing for your greatness."

Is she saving our lives or is she reaching into our handbags for our checkbooks? "We will train you to use your future to make your future," she says, pitching the Advanced

Course to the graduates. And we'll get \$100 off the tuition if we sign up right now. Amazingly, more than half the room is signing up. Beth Handel knows how to hustle.

My \$375 has bought me a flimsy synthesis of world philosophies, littered with the sort of aphoristic suggestions abundant in high school yearbooks ("Be yourself and you'll be more than you ever thought of being"—Janis Joplin), paralleling aspects of Plato's allegory of the Cave, Alcoholics Anonymous, Freudian psychology, Christianity, positive thinking, Scientology, group therapy, Fascism, and carnival hucksterism. Saturday night's super-bonus homework assignment, with its proposition that the act of bringing new recruits to the Forum is itself a bold and transforming endeavor, sticks naggingly in my mind. Were a psychiatrist to suggest to a suffering patient, "Your therapy will

considered a bald abuse of power.

What exactly is happening here, and why do so many people relate to it? My suspicion is that because we so badly want what it is that we're looking for and because we have put our money down and expect a return, we're inclined to believe the Forum works. Moreover, as psychotherapist Milton H. Erickson, MD, has demonstrated, in a kind of informal hypnotic process people can become submissive to voices of authority through a series of indirectly applied techniques of suggestion. Such hypnosis, practiced without formal trance induction, employs jokes, confusion, guilt, humiliation, group pressure, and sleep deprivation to assert its control. The stories leaders tell—known as "killer shares" among experts who study such self-actualization groups—are rehearsed but apparently spontaneous anecdotes calculated to deliver an emotional message. Strategically placed suggestions are another form of subtly coercive influence. When Handel says at the start of our group experience of fear, "There might be some crying during this exercise," the suggestion is that we *should* cry. But anti-cult counselors say that the Forum itself is not a cult; in a cult members are encouraged to live within the group and are conditioned to be mistrustful of the outside world. The Forum doesn't do that, though there is, experts agree, a denigration of critical thinking. My classmate Janet Jenkins questions Landmark's capacity for self-criticism and objects to the program's sweeping advocacy of indiscriminate forgiveness. "It's a premature leap to a predetermined reconciliation," Jenkins says, "as though every case is the same—it isn't. The human soul is complex; a quick fix is probably going to be temporary."

But of course the emphasis in our culture is on the quick fix. When Handel tells an overweight man that he has to accept his body before he can change it, she doesn't say *how* he will find a way to do that

in a culture where body image is crucial. Just do it? Just say no? Don't worry, be happy? In a commercial world the overriding idea is not to accept what you have, but to get what you don't have. We are inundated with ideals to strive for: the right car, the right clothes, the right sex life, the right income level. What's driving us to the Forum? Obviously we are in pain. But self-acceptance under the best circumstances takes a lifetime. The sort of intimacy and connection we're seeking can't be found in a weekend, no matter how much money we put down. A shallow Oprah world wants a shallow Forum solution. Everything else in the world can be bought, why not happiness? In the end, the transformational key the Forum offers is nothing more than words. *My life has been transformed.* Say it enough times and it might come true. □

